

Before we put 'Virginia' on the stage

FEW of the 6,000 people who clapped, 'encored,' and cheered the seven performances of 'Virginia' by the Chelmsford Operatic Society at the Regent Theatre last week could have realised exactly all that goes into the production of their yearly feast of musical entertainment.

It all started nearly twelve months ago, when the committee of the Society, whose job it is to decide these things, chose 'Virginia.' Some members objected, because, they said, the show was "doted," but at an extraordinary general meeting the vote was 'carry on.'

With that minor crisis over, everyone threw themselves into the job of making the show a success. The first auditions were held and the principal parts were provisionally allotted by the Casting Committee.

It was obvious from the start that June Gisby was a 'natural' for the name part—Virginia. Her face, voice, figure, and above, all, personality, suited her to the part admirably. Fred Munnion—the



JUNE GISBY The cast gave her a puppy.

sional producer, took over. Miss Ward, who runs her own ballet school and operatic company in Brighton, was also producing two other shows at the same time. No wonder if she sometimes looked tired.

Once a week at first, then twice a week, and the cast went down to the great echoing canteen room at Hoffmann's works to rehearse.

At first the singing went to pieces as movements were introduced. A couple of snap rehearsals, musical alone, with hardworking accompanist and assistant musical director, George Horry, soon put that right.

Then Miss Ward could

settle down to introducing her own touches to the show. The dialogue and the music are written down for all to learn correctly. It is up to the producer to translate them into forms the audience will enjoy. Rightly, in a musical comedy, Miss Ward concentrated on the dancing and singing numbers.

The comedy tango performed by Virginia and NinniJohn, which received storms of applause each night, was entirely of her devising. One critic went so far as to call it "the funniest thing I have ever seen on an amateur stage." When it was first performed during

rehearsal, even the cast, knowing each number almost backwards, 'stopped the show' for a full minute with their applause.

BETWEEN rehearsals the dancing chorus and principals practised in their own time, bringing their own parts up to perfection. On the whole, everyone worked well with one another, and very few "temperamental incidents" took place.

All the same, time seemed to move further than progress. Soon the committee members, working even further "behind the scenes," had measured everyone for the costumes, organised the photographs, were nearly ready with the programmes; someone even found time to organise a trip for the Society to see a London show—just to see "how it should be done."

Then it was the final hectic week before the show. Costumes appeared, packed in great hampers—skips to the initiated—in time for the dress rehearsal. Only when they were unpacked was it realised that another hamper, of equal size, had gone, by courtesy of British Railways, to Luton! Dress rehearsal lasted from 1.30 p.m. to half-past ten. Everyone, tired and depressed, prophesied a flop.

Yet, after all, the crowd liked it. "Virginia" was a success. June Gisby scored a personal triumph. Freddie Munnion "brought down the house." The dancing girls were cheered, and the chorus numbers were "encored."

Parties from all over the country, including Blackburn and Peterborough, came to see Chelmsford's "Virginia," and added their praise to the general chorus.

First night was a hard-earned success. Then, through the week, the performances became progressively easier to put on. Stage hands and cast learned the scenery positions and moved faster

and more quietly. On final night, with a "house," everyone put themselves go, the audience.

EVERYONE away memories the show. Personally, my most potent one is the three-inch-diameter bruise on my shin-bone, which I received when I walked a stool in the darkness and nearly brought down Act II., Scene II. scenery. ("Virginia" dropped every night "Ninny," has another bruise in another part. Otherwise, I remember most:—

The curious echoing the Hoffmann hall, was the rehearsals place. . . .

The tired lines on Mr. Ward's face at rehearsal as yet another thing wrong. . . .

"Hock," still checking his lines from the book the seventh performance. . . .

The impression of genial Mr. Dykes made the ladies of the chorus especially the young ones—when he appeared with his baton and evening dress in the orchestra pit on Monday. . . .

The rush of removing black grease paint to make way for ordinary make-up and evening dress approximately ten minutes. . . .

The riotous party organised by the tired cast after the last show, to "round off" the whole thing. . . .

And finally, the way which unassuming June Gisby received at least fifteen bouquets, half dozen presents, and to look on her face when she saw the little puppy presented to her by the cast. . . .

For, you see, one of the secrets of the success of a show like 'Virginia,' more than twenty years' old, is typical of its period, that everyone in the company is in it primarily to enjoy himself. With a show it is only what put into it that you, audience, can receive from it.

- By

JOHN PARKER

original Funnion—found NinniJohn, the part opposite June, just suited to his talent for clowning. Other parts fell into line as the musical rehearsals, which took place before Christmas, went on.

Mr. Herbert Dykes, the musical director, with whom 'Virginia' was an old favourite, took charge, and in the tiny hall of St. Anne's School the chorus and principals laboriously but enthusiastically learned their numbers until they went to bed dreaming them.

From his experience, Mr. Dykes was able to describe the show and anticipate the desires of the professional producer, which eliminated a great deal of awkwardness later.

By Christmas the singing numbers were thoroughly learned—sitting down. But then Miss Mavis Ward, the profes-